



COMMITTEE FOR ACCURACY IN MIDDLE EAST REPORTING I

ISRAEL RECYCLES WATER, AMIRA HASS RECYCLES FALSE WATER CHARGES

BY: ALEX SAFIAN, PHD / JUNE 23, 2016



Amira Hass must really like false Palestinian charges that Israel is stealing their water, since she keeps on repeating those false Palestinian charges, requiring us to repeat the refutation.

Whereas previously Hass charged that profligate Israelis “use three times more water a day in their households as West Bank Palestinians do,” in her latest effort she charges that:

On average, the Palestinians consume 73 liters per person per day. Below the recommended minimum. Israelis consume a daily 180 liters on average, and there are those who say even more.

She also charges that “Israel sells the Palestinians water that it first stole from them,” and:

With the Oslo Accords, Israel imposed an outrageous, racist, arrogant and brutal division of water sources in the West Bank: 80 percent for Israelis (on both sides of

the Green Line), and 20 percent for the Palestinians ...

Hass is dead wrong about the relative usage of water by Israelis and Palestinians, and about her other charges too, but before getting into details and numbers, it's important to illustrate a deeper distortion in her claims.

What if, for example, one society uses most of its water for agriculture, in a very wasteful old-fashioned way, like flood irrigation of water-intensive crops, and therefore has only limited water left for residential use in households?

And what if, in contrast, a neighboring society saves water in every way possible, starting with low flow toilets and low flow shower heads, and it also invents and uses extremely efficient agricultural techniques like drip irrigation? And what if that society also recycles its sewage – say eventually it treats more than 80% of its sewage – devoting most of that reclaimed water to agriculture, thereby saving an equivalent amount of fresh water? And what if that society also builds some of the largest desalination plants in the world, turning sea water into fresh drinking water?

And if as a result of all these efforts the second society has much more clean water available for its people to drink, does that mean it is discriminating against the first society?

Obviously the answer is no, any claim of discrimination here would be nonsense.

But if the first society is the West Bank Palestinians, and the second is Israel, then Amira Hass's conclusion would evidently be that yes indeed, this is proof of Israeli discrimination against Palestinians.

In other words, just looking at basic realities, and without even examining detailed numbers, Hass's discrimination claims are nonsense.

Relative Water Usage of Palestinians and Israelis

Before making any comparisons between Israeli and Palestinian use of fresh water resources, one must take into account that total Israeli water usage includes significant amounts of treated sewage and desalinated sea water. For a fair comparison, this additional produced water should be subtracted from the total amount used by Israel, so that Israeli use of fresh water can be compared to Palestinian use of fresh water.

If this is done the per capita consumption of fresh water for all uses by Israelis is 150 CM/year versus 140 CM/year for Palestinians, that is, essentially no difference.

If one looks not at all uses but only at domestic or household use, the Palestinian number suffers because of, as noted above, the large amounts of water wasted on inefficient agriculture, and also a further factor, extremely large losses of water due to leaky pipes. For domestic use of fresh water per capita consumption by Israelis (as of 2006) was 84 CM/year versus 58 CM/year by Palestinians, clearly contradicting Hass's reckless claim that Israelis use three times as much domestic water than do Palestinians. (For details on the above numbers see the [article by Prof. Haim Gvirtzman](#).)

And one must stress again, Palestinians would have as much domestic water as Israelis if they didn't waste so much fresh water in extremely inefficient and archaic agricultural use.

Basic Facts about Middle East Water

Contrary to what Hass seems to want her readers to believe, Israel does not “steal Palestinian water.” Israel obtains roughly 50 percent of its fresh water from the Sea of Galilee and the Coastal Aquifer, both of which are entirely within Israel’s pre-1967 borders. Another 30 percent comes from the Western and Northeastern Aquifers of the Mountain Aquifer system. These aquifers straddle the Green Line separating Israel from the West Bank, **but most of the stored water is under pre-1967 Israel**, making it easily accessible only in Israel.

Thus, even in the 1950s Israel used 95 percent of the Western Aquifer’s water, and 82 percent of the Northeastern Aquifer’s water. Today, Israel’s share of these aquifers has declined to 83 percent and 80 percent, respectively. That is, under direct Israeli administration the Palestinian share of these aquifers has actually increased. (For sources and citations see [here](#).)

In addition, every year at least 40 MCM (million cubic meters) of water from sources within Israel is piped over the Green Line for Palestinian use in the West Bank. For example, the major Palestinian city of Ramallah and surrounding Palestinian communities receive over 10 MCM of water from Israel annually, according to the Jerusalem Water Undertaking, the local Palestinian water utility. This accounts for about 83 percent of the water supplied by the utility. (The figure given on the JWU website is an average of 28,000 square meters daily. Aside from the typo of square meters rather than cubic meters, this works out to more than 10 MCM per year.)

And despite the virtual declaration of war against Israel by the Hamas rulers of Gaza, Israel still sends to Gaza another 4 MCM of Israeli water annually through the Kissufim Line of the National Water Carrier, serving the Palestinian localities of El-Bureij, Moazi, Abasan, Bani Suheila and Khan Yunis (*Statistical Data on Gaza Area and Jericho*, Israel Foreign Ministry, June 1994).

Thus, contrary to Hass, the **Palestinians are using Israeli water**.

And not just the Palestinians. Despite its own meager supply, under its peace agreement with Jordan Israel provides more than 55 MCM annually to the Kingdom. Perhaps no other country in the world, facing the severe shortages that Israel does, has shared so much water with its neighbors, including hostile neighbors.

Palestinian Water Use Since 1967

There has been a vast increase in domestic (or home) Palestinian water usage in the West Bank since 1967, but this is routinely ignored by Hass, perhaps because informing readers of such facts would undermine her fundamental story line of alleged Israeli oppression.

In the period from 1967 to 1995 West Bank Palestinians increased their domestic water use by 640%, from 5.4 MCM to 40 MCM (*Judea-Samaria and the Gaza District – A 16 Year Survey 1967 – 1983*, Israel, Ministry of Defense, 1983; Arnon Soffer, The Israeli Palestinian Conflict over Water Resources, *Palestine-Israel Journal*, Volume 5, No. 1, 1998). By way of comparison, in the same 28 year period Israeli domestic usage increased by just 142% (*Statistical Abstract of Israel 1996*, V47).

This huge jump in Palestinian consumption was possible only because Israel drilled or permitted the drilling of over 50 new wells for the Palestinian population, laid hundreds of kilometers of new water mains and connected hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns to the newly built water system (Background: Water, Israel and the Middle East, Israel Foreign Ministry 1991; Marcia Drezon-Tepler, Contested Waters and the Prospects for Arab-Israeli Peace, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol 30, No. 2, April 1994)

Palestinian sources broadly confirm this picture. For example, Taher Nassereddin, Director General of the West Bank Water Department, has stated that:

[Palestinian] consumption for domestic purposes has increased as a result of population growth and that there were no severe restrictions on drilling new wells for these purposes. (Taher Nassereddin, Legal and Administrative Responsibility of Domestic Water Supply to the Palestinians, in *Joint Management of Shared Aquifers*, 1997)

It is important to note, however, that for political reasons some Palestinian villages and towns refused to be hooked up to the new water system, and they therefore may not have a reliable water supply today. Thus, as reported in *Audubon Magazine*, the West Bank town of Marda:

... like many West Bank villages and towns, had refused to hook up with the Israeli water system in the early 1980's, when Israeli officials offered them the chance. Doing so, the politicians felt, would legitimize the Israeli occupation. (Bruce Stutz, Water and Peace, *Audubon*, September 1994)

Israeli Water Use and that of its Neighbors

Far from being profligate with water, among countries in the immediate area Israel has the lowest annual per capita usage of fresh water: Syria's is 1069 CM, Egypt's is 921, Lebanon's is 444, and Jordan's is 201. (*World Resources 1998-99*)

It is also instructive to look at the trend of Israeli water use. In the ten year period from 1984/85 to 1995, for example, Israel's population grew by 32 percent, but its water use grew by just 3.3 percent, a sign of the country's great efforts at water conservation and efficiency (calculated from data in the *Statistical Abstract of Israel 1997*).

In contrast, during the same period Jordan's population increased by 59 percent, but its water use increased by 113 percent (Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, *Statistical Yearbook 1987, 1995*).

Similarly, in this period Syria's population increased by 38 percent, but consumption of *drinking water* increased by 43 percent (figures for agricultural and industrial use were apparently not published) (Syrian Arab Republic, *Statistical Abstract 1987, 1998*).

International Law and Shared Water Resources

Many reports, including earlier articles by Amira Hass, have uncritically accepted Palestinian charges that Israeli water policies violate international law.

Such charges are groundless. The relevant legal norms are the Helsinki Rules (1966), as supplemented by the Seoul Rules (1986), which, according to a leading authority, may be summarized as:

1. Human conditions, i.e., the actual needs of the communities that depend on the waters, take precedence over the natural properties that exist in the basin.

2. Among the human conditions, **priority is given to past and existing uses**, at the expense of potential uses.(Eyal Benvenisti, International Law and the Mountain Aquifer, in *Water and Peace in the Middle East*, Jad Isaac and Hillel Shuval, eds., 1994, emphasis added)

Thus Israel's first and continuing use of these water resources is justified by generally accepted international legal guidelines. It is interesting to note that these same guidelines have been invoked by Egypt regarding the waters of the Nile (Egypt is downstream from Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, and a number of other African countries), by Iraq and Syria regarding the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates (Iraq and Syria are downstream from Turkey), and by Jordan regarding the waters of the Yarmuk (Jordan is downstream from Syria). (Arnon Sofer, *Rivers of Fire: The Conflict over Water in the Middle East*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1999)

It is also interesting to note that relevant United States law parallels these international legal guidelines. In *Colorado v. New Mexico* , 459 US 176 (1982) and *Colorado v. New Mexico*, 467 US 310 (1984), the Supreme Court held that Colorado could not use water from the Vermejo River, despite the fact that the river originates in Colorado before flowing into New Mexico. The prior use of the river's water by farm and industrial users in New Mexico was held to entitle them to continued exclusive use of the resource.

Water Under the Oslo Accords

Under Oslo 2 (Interim Agreement, Sept. 1995), significant responsibility over water was transferred to the Palestinian Authority, including the right to drill wells at agreed sites. As part of the accords (Annex 3, Article 40), the two sides resolved that in the near term Palestinians would receive an additional 28.6 MCM per year, of which the PA was obligated to supply 67 percent. While Israel has supplied its share of additional water to the Palestinians, the PA has largely failed to do its part.

The bottom line is that virtually every charge leveled by Amira Hass is either flat out wrong or blatantly deceptive and *Ha'aretz* should immediately run a forthright correction.

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Alex Safian is the associate director of CAMERA. His articles have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, the

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